

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD – YEAR A

First Reading Daniel 7: 9–10, 13–14

The Book of Daniel is named after its main character rather than its author. Daniel is described as living in Babylonia in the 6th century BC, though almost all scholars agree that the book was written around 165 BC, at a time of great tribulation for the Jews. It is therefore the ‘newest’ book of the Old Testament.

The Book of Daniel can be divided into two clear sections. Chapters 1–6 consist of stories about Daniel and his companions, while Chapters 7–12 offer four different visions of an apocalyptic nature. Apocalyptic literature (revelations received through visions) was to become popular in the ancient world, and is found until c. 200 AD. Written in times of distress and difficulties, the main purpose of such visions was to encourage the Jews to keep their faith.

Chapter 7 marks the beginning of the series of ‘visions’ experienced by Daniel himself. In its opening verses, he sees four great beasts emerging from the chaotic abyss below (Daniel 7: 4–12). They are obviously connected with evil, but in the last two verses of today’s passage, the creature who appears comes from ‘the clouds of heaven’, a location traditionally linked with God.

It is the first time in Scripture that we come across the term ‘Son of Man’. In this context, despite coming from heaven, Daniel sees a ‘human being’, not a deity. This same expression is much employed in the New Testament, and Jesus speaks of the ‘Son of Man’ in Mark’s Gospel.

Originally it may have been intended as a symbol of the sovereign of a kingdom where God would rule, but over the centuries a gradual shift took place leading Christians to see the ‘Son of Man’ as the Messiah King, the Christ.

Gospel Matthew 17: 1–9 The Transfiguration

The account of this remarkable event is also read on the Second Sunday of Lent in the Roman Catholic Church, and on the Sunday before Lent in other traditions. It takes place immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that his ministry will end in rejection and death. The ‘mountain’ is a significant location for St Matthew, where Jesus would often go to pray.



A high mountain where they could be alone

It was traditionally held from the time of Origen (3rd c. AD) that the Transfiguration took place on Mount Tabor (pictured: 1886 feet high). Others, however, suggest Mount Hermon, 14 miles from Caesarea Philippi (9,400 ft high and 11,000 ft above the level of the Jordan Valley). Hermon is so high that it can be seen from the Dead Sea at the other end of Palestine, more than 100 miles away. The meaning of the ‘high mountain’ is nevertheless theological rather than geographical. We are reminded of God’s

revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24: 12–18) and also to Elijah (1Kings 19: 8–18) where Mount Horeb (or Sinai) is referred to as the mountain of God.

‘Lord, it is wonderful to be here’

When Peter spoke of the tents he wanted to make, he was referring to the annual Jewish feast of Sukkot, the feast of Tabernacles. Originally, this was an agricultural feast which commemorated the Israelites making little huts in order to spend the night in the fields during harvest. It was one of their most joyous feasts. Peter was comparing the joy he was experiencing on the mountain with the most joyful scene he could imagine.

His face shone like the sun

In Jewish thought, Moses and Elijah represented God’s revelation through the Law and the Prophets. The Jews believed that Elijah was to be a forerunner and herald of the Messiah.

A bright cloud covered them

The cloud or ‘Shekinah’ is familiar to believing Jews as nothing less than the saving presence of God. A pillar of cloud led the Jews out of Egypt (Ex. 13: 21–2), and it was in a cloud that God gave the tablets of the Law to Moses (Ex. 34: 5). Throughout Israel’s history there is mention of the cloud in which resided the mysterious glory of God.

The voice of God

Like the Israelites of old, the disciples are terrified as they see and hear these manifestations of the presence of God. They hear Jesus once again identified as God’s beloved Son, as at the time of his Baptism. This time, however, they are told to ‘Listen to him’, a reference to Deuteronomy 18: 15.